

THE PRESENT STATE OF SWAHILI LITERATURE AS AN ARTISTIC AND SOCIAL PHENOMENON

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This study is aimed at giving an overall picture of present state of creative writing in the language of Swahili in the Eastern part of the African continent, i.e. its condition after the year 2000. And as a start, I would like to make some preliminary considerations, which I hope will be useful for the subsequent presentation:

1) Swahili literature in this study largely refers to modern creative writing in Swahili language in two East African states, namely Kenya and Tanzania. This literature came to life in the last century under the considerable European influence; it features modern system of types and genres and is characterised by rapid development. The genres of Swahili creative writing established in the previous historical periods will be referred to in this study, when necessary, as ‘old’ or ‘classical’. Also, the corpus of literature dealt with in the study does not include children’s literature; however, a few words about it will be said at the end of the paper.

2) It also should be noted that the study is based on the presumption that literature – in this case, specifically African literature and especially literature in African languages – is a social institution, that visibly influences the formation, among other things, of the public consciousness of various social groups, and therefore is an important contributive factor of social development in the said countries. This assumption helps also interconnect “artistic” and “social” aspects of the phenomenon of Swahili literature, as stated in the title of the study.

3) In relation to the above, I must also say that although the study, in fact, is not based on any specific methodology or theory, the analysis that I will try to present may stand rather close to what is called sociology of literature (although not in its ‘old Marxist’ understanding); at the same time, certain ‘purely’ literary aspects will also be highlighted; and, on top of this, I will try to outline certain relationships between artistic and social aspects of Swahili writing after the year 2000.

3) As for the sources used – of course I would, when necessary, quote authoritative critical works; but mainly the presentation would be based on my personal impressions, as I was able to watch certain processes take place recently in Swahili literature almost as an insider, having stayed in East Africa for the last ten years. The paper may also reveal my higher acquaintance with Kenyan Swahili writing, since for these ten years I have been teaching literature in Kenyan

universities – but of course I will try to cover as much as possible the Tanzanian part, as being indispensable for the overall picture.

Present day functions and state of Swahili literature may become more understandable if we look very briefly at its recent past. As agreed by some scholars (e.g. Ohly 1982, Bertoncini et al. 2009), the firm foundation for modern Swahili writing was laid during the colonial period – suffice it to recall the efforts of such authors as James Mbotela, Shaaban Robert, Amri Abedi, Graham Hyslop, Henry Kuria and other writers, who by their works proved the very compatibility of Swahili language and modern system of literary genres. However, the intense development of modern Swahili writing started in post-independence period, when, according to Elena Bertoncini, “modern system of genres came into shape and literature acquired its rightful place in the life of two East African states” (Bertoncini et al. 2009:23). To illustrate more vividly this “rightful place” of Swahili literature in Tanzania and Kenya in post-colonial period, I dare to represent it through the most illustrative language – that of figures, in very simple diagrams, showing the approximate number of published titles in both countries in order to illustrate the quantitative dynamics in the development of Swahili writing in both countries. As mentioned, the numbers are approximate, of course, there may be inaccuracies, but I believe the general tendency will be illustrated clearly enough. The diagrams, then, would look like this:

Table 1: Approximate number of published titles, 1950s – 1970s

1950s – 1960s	Tanzania	Kenya
Novel and novella	17	8
Short story books	1	-
Drama	6	5
Poetry	7	-

1970s	Tanzania	Kenya
Novel and novella	114	26
Short story books	11	4
Drama	22	16
Poetry	15	7

As it can be seen, over the four decades the Swahili writing featured the obvious preponderance of Tanzania, both in quantitative, as demonstrated, and more importantly, qualitative aspects – for example, Tanzanian literature in this period has developed the whole range of prosaic forms

(especially notable is the so-called ‘new’, or ‘experimental’ novel, that emerged in 1990s and immensely expanded the limits of the genre in Swahili writing). Tanzanians also ‘revolutionized’ Swahili poetry by introducing free verse, and created variety of dramatic forms – from historical to parabolic; popular writing in the country was also flourishing. Swahili writing in Kenya, at the same time, was more oriented towards what can be called didactic genres, with very few species of historical, parabolic-satirical and detective prose. I will deliberately not dwell in any detail on the **reasons** for this inequality between two national branches of Swahili literature, believing it will suffice to mention the difference in language policies, Swahili given preference in Tanzania, and Kenya, at that time, opting for English as its official language before the New Constitution of 2010.

In view of the above, what, then, is the present state of Swahili literature – that is, its condition in the first decades of the new century? First of all – has it preserved the status quo of Tanzanian preponderance over less variegated and slower developing Swahili writing in Kenya? I would suggest to answer these questions, first, again by the comparison of the qualitative growth of Swahili writing in both countries in the current period, - again, by numbers of titles:

Table 2: Approximate number of published titles, 1980s – 2000s

1980s	Tanzania	Kenya
Novel and novella	170	12
Short story books	12	-
Drama	22	20
Poetry	7	3

1990s	Tanzania	Kenya
Novel and novella	83	9
Short story books	6	1
Drama	7	8
Poetry	1	2

2000s	Tanzania	Kenya
Novel and novella	42	53
Short story books	4	13
Drama	7	19
Poetry	9	3

Kenya

As we see, the last decades witnessed a visible shift in literary production from Kenya to Tanzania. Although the period after 2000 is marked by the deaths of such prominent Kenyan Swahili writers as Katama Mkangi and Yusuf King'ala, the number of writers that appeared on literary scene in these years seems to leave more hopes than apprehensions. Of **23** Kenyan authors whose titles are numbered in the diagram, only **five** published their first books in 1990s; the rest entered the literary scene in this century.

One of the reasons why Swahili writing seems to be shifting from Tanzania to Kenya may be the changes in the policies of Kenyan state towards Swahili language. According to Kyallo Wadi Wamitila, "A basic reason for this spurt has been the expansion of the market for creative Swahili texts both in schools and in tertiary institutions, as a result of deliberate policies aimed at encouraging the use of the language and, as a consequence, a greater willingness on the part of publishers to print works written in Kiswahili" (Bertoncini et al., 2009:54). Indeed, Kenyan government has put a tangible effort towards strengthening the positions of Swahili in the country; as a result of introduction of Swahili as a compulsory subject in schools in the mid-1980s, by now we have almost two generations of Kenyans countrywide who, unlike their parents and grandparents, are fluent in standard Swahili. Presently in Kenya Swahili seems to be the main language of communication in urban areas, and especially among the younger generation – and we should remember that the current mean age of Kenyan population is 19 years. Thus not only the language, but its literature has become in a way 'fashionable', which may be illustrated also by the fact that well-known cultural public figures, such as TV-announcers Ken Walibora and Swaleh Mdoe, have made their contributions into Swahili writing. Walibora, in fact, having been for several years the news anchor at NBC Swahili service, has completely changed his priorities towards becoming the full time writer and literature lecturer.

Of course, if we are speaking about the achievements of Kenyan Swahili literature in the last decades, we mostly speak about novel – and especially, the so-called 'new' or 'experimental' novel (although many other terms are used – Diegner 2005). Established in Tanzania by such writers as Euphrase Kezilahabi, William Mkufya and Said Ahmed Mohamed, it has been substantially developed by their younger Kenyan peers (namely, Kyallo Wadi Wamitila and Tom Olali). 'Experimental novel' in Swahili has by now been praised sufficiently, so I would only say here that currently it represents the 'upper storey' of contemporary Swahili writing, being the 'showcase' of its achievements. In addressing the urgent problems of present-day world (not only Africa) this novel combines traits of various literary trends, such as postmodernism, magical realism, etc., with a very lavish use of language, and complex, frequently unusual and masterful-

ly created characters and plots. The audience of these novels is so far an enigma at least for me – I can only assume that they are primarily targeting the people professionally associated with Swahili language, such as university students of the language and its teachers on various levels.

However, no matter how proud could we be of the ‘new’ novel as the frontline of Swahili literary development, ~~the number of these texts appears rather humble compared to~~ the bulk of contemporary Swahili novel ~~which~~ still consists of conventional realistic-social-critical form. Prevalence of this form in Kenyan (and, to a lesser extent, Tanzanian) writing could be ascribed to two reasons: 1) on a higher level – to the writers’ urge to increase the readers’ social awareness; 2) on a lower level – to the fact that many, if not the majority of, Kenyan writers are targeting the school audience.

This school-orientation of Swahili authors has in itself a number of solid reasons. First, the book that is chosen for a school curriculum guarantees its author rather quick and stable source of profit. Second, a chance for a writer to have his book among the chosen ones is rather high – and let the figures speak again: in the previous decades, Kenyan schools used 7 titles of Swahili fiction, 6 of which were written by Tanzanians; by the year 2007, the number was increased up to almost 40, the majority of new titles being written by Kenyan authors. Moreover, there are additional mechanisms of stimulation – for example, the annual Jomo Kenyatta Prize, the receiving of which is almost a guarantee for a book to be taken to school curriculum. I dare state that this ‘school orientation’ may account not only for the tangible growth of Kenyan Swahili writing in the last decades, but also for the domination of ‘conventional’ literary forms in this literature. Moreover, even the growth of short story as a genre may find a similar explanation – most of the recently published anthologies have already entered the school curriculum.

Does this school orientation mean, as it may be assumed, the general decrease in the artistic level of novels – in terms of their adjustment to the school purposes? Of course there are authors (such as Ali Hassan Njama, Omar Babu, and others) who give preference to the well-tested genre of didactic novel, with its simplified characters, straightened plots and moralistic endings.

However, there is another trend in present day realistic novel in Kenya, whose followers are aiming at presenting the urgent problems of modern society in an artistically accomplished manner, with complex characters and life-like plots, – Nevertheless, their books are also quite suitable for the high-school level exactly because of their artistic merits. I would tentatively label this current in Kenyan Swahili novel “neo-realism” – for, in my view, the creative method of these writers has at least a few things in common with a well-known cinematic trend. Many of the writers than may be qualified as belonging to it are university dons, such as John Habwe, Mwenda Mbatiah and Kyallo Wadi Wamitila (University of Nairobi), Clara Momanyi and Alex Ngure (Catholic University), Anduvate Mwavali (Masinde Muliro University), and some others.

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Their high level of knowledge and skills in literature allow them to reach commendable level of artistry in their works, but also to present their thematic concerns in a manner captivating, convincing and, in the long run, enjoyable for the high-school audience.

In the same way as the novel, the bulk of Kenyan Swahili drama in the after 2000 is what I would deem as ‘high-school drama’. These plays also deal with serious social and political issues, but they also do it in a manner accessible and enjoyable for high-school students – simple, but expressive language, simple, but wholesome characters, captivating and easily understandable plots. Two trends may be observed in this high school drama, which in an earlier published article I conditionally called “drama of manners” and “school political drama”. Generally, when, for example, National Theatre in Nairobi stages a Swahili play, the first sight one sees are the long rows of school buses on the theatre parking and outside – thus, the “target audience” of the most of the Kenyan plays is rather obvious.

However, as in the situation with the prose, there are notable exceptions – playwrights whose works reach far beyond the ‘high-school level’. Examples can be found in the plays by Timothy Arege and Humphreys Omwaka. Arege opts for the form of psychological drama, where most of the action, in a somewhat Chekhovian manner, goes in the minds and souls of the characters. Omwaka in his play *Safari* (2004) tackles political issues of universal appeal in the manner resembling to absurd drama of 1950s. Again, I dare assume that the audience targeted by these authors stands rather far from high schools classes – and again, this audience may most likely be found in the university auditoriums and teachers’ offices.

Kenyan poetry after 2000 seems to be less ‘school-focused’ than prose and drama, primarily because in many poetic collections published recently classical genres of Swahili poetry, *tenzi* and *mashairi*, seem to be replaced with free verse. I am referring primarily to the works of Kithaka wa Mberia, outstanding poet and playwright, who so far has authored 4 collections of free verse poetry and may be considered a key figure of modern Kenyan poetry in Swahili. But although Kithaka’s first book, *Mchezo wa karata* (Cards game, 1997) was lucky enough to even enter the school curriculum, the subsequent collections of his poems had to be published also in English translations, and the educationalists more readily accept earlier published anthologies of classical poems. Moreover, free-verse poetry in Swahili seems to be still strongly opposed by the adepts of traditional poetry, as was revealed at a recent poetry colloquium in Nairobi in 2009. Thus we may assume that free verse in Swahili still seems to remain a rather unusual poetic exercise in Kenya (you will hardly find in, e.g., in *Taifa Leo*), and therefore it may again seem plausible that Kithaka’s poems were largely targeting the already mentioned audience of Swahili professionals.

Also, one of the reasons for the present rise of Swahili literature in Kenya may also lay in its publishing landscape. Currently more than ten publishers are producing creative writing in Swahili, among primary ones being Jomo Kenyatta Foundation (by far the first – compare 43 titles in its catalogue’s section of Swahili general readers to 25 titles in the English one); Kenya’s “publishing giant”, Eastern African Educational publishers, seems to be more reluctant to publish Swahili titles, whereas smaller companies do it seldom.

Tanzania

The current, and rather obvious, decrease in Tanzanian Swahili writing may be ascribed to several reasons, among them, strange as it may sound, the growing popularity of English in the country, which also went up with the current growth of private universities and schools. This factor, coupled with some others, such as government tax on paper, has caused a substantial re-orientation of local publishers, who currently prefer to publish more quickly selling materials, e.g. textbooks. As for the literary works, the tendency towards school orientation appears even more obvious than in Kenya; “cheti ya idhibati”, a state-issued certificate of eligibility for school curriculum, seems to be an almost indispensable condition for a manuscript to be accepted for a publisher’s scrutiny. Hence, even the established Tanzanian writers, such as Said Ahmed Mohamed and Shafi Adam, opt for publishing their works in Kenya, with her far more flexible publishing and marketing conditions.

Tanzanian novel of the period may be divided into two uneven categories. First, there are novels by established writers of established quality, representing established trends; gain, for the purpose of convenience, this may be represented in table:

Table 3 Tanzanian novel after the year 2000

<p>‘Experimental’:</p> <p>Said Ahmed Mohamed – <i>Babu alipofufuka</i> (Grandfather resurrected, 2002), <i>Dunia yao</i> (Their world, 2006)</p> <p>Gabriel Ruhumbika – <i>Janga sugu la wazawa</i> (Lasting doom of the natives, 2002)</p>
<p>Social-critical:</p> <p>Said Ahmed Mohamed – <i>Nyuso za mwanamke</i> (Faces of woman, 2010)</p> <p>William Mkufya – <i>Ua la faraja</i> (Flower of bliss, 2002)</p> <p>Abdallah Saffari – <i>Joka la mdimu</i> (Snake of a lime-tree, 2008),</p> <p>Zainab Burhani – <i>Kipimo cha mizani</i> (Measuring scales, 2004),</p> <p>Seiti Chachage † – <i>Makuadi ya soko huria</i> (Pimps of the free market, 2002),</p>

Thomas Kamugisha † – Safari ya mwalimu Katoto (Journey of teacher Toddler, 2004), John Rutayisingwa † – <i>Guberi mwafidhi / Ruksa</i> (The hopeless harlot / Permissiveness, 2004)
Adventure: Ben Mtobwa † – <i>Mtambo wa mauti</i> (Device of death, 2004), Elvis Musiba † – <i>Uchu</i> (Desire, 2001) Hassan Nkussa – <i>Kikulacho</i> (What eats you, 2001)
Historical: Adam Shafi Adam – <i>Haini</i> (Traitor, 2003)

As we see, the major trends of the novel genre are represented here; we also see that quite a few writers have left this world. Some of these novels, dealing with recognizable societal issues, have found their way into the school curriculum (e.g., those by Saffari, Ruhumbika and Chachage), others, like “experimental” ones (mostly published in Kenya), are presumably aimed at the audience related to the language on the professional level.

Second category of Tanzanian novels is comprised of the works by younger writers, most of who have entered the literary scene in this or previous decades. These authors are pronouncedly more “school-oriented”, appealing more to well-tested form of moralistic novels, sometimes with strong ethnographic background (*such as Kavunju mkunaardhi* by Jones Mapunda, 2007). Moreover, some established writers also seem to join their ranks, presumably, because of the obvious benefits related to school-oriented books – such as Emmanuel Mbogo, distinguished playwright and novelist, who in the last decades published only one prose book – an adolescent novella *Watoto wa mama N’tilie*, which immediately was taken to school curriculum. Some young writers come up with certain new forms, like a feministic novella *Ndoa ya gharama* (2002) by a young Zanzibari writer Abdullah Ismail Kanduru, but such innovations seem to be rather exceptional.

Speaking about Tanzanian prose after 2000, it seems indispensable to say at least a few words about popular prose – the stratum that, being hardly present in Swahili literature of Kenya, has been flourishing in Tanzania since 1970s. In spite of the demise in the 2000s of such giants of popular writing as Seiti Chachage, Elvis Musiba and, most importantly, Ben Mtobwa, and the decline of some previously active publishing houses producing popular books – such as Ben Mtobwa’s Heko Publishers – popular writing in Tanzania not only survived (although in decreased numbers), but also developed new generic forms and themes. Well-known writer Beka Mfaume came up with, arguably, the first specie of “profane-hero” political detective, his novel *Mhanga wa Ikulu* (State house victim, 2010) featuring not a professional investigator, but a jour-

nalist working for a tabloid, who gets into trouble because of possession of evidence that the president has killed his wife. In his other novel, (mama Jenniffer) Mfaume treats the themes of lesbian relationship that previously was a taboo in Tanzanian writing

One of the most notable figures in Tanzanian popular writing after 2000s is Eric James Shigongo, the author of several voluminous novels (over 500 pages each) and the owner of a publishing house, printing currently 6 weekly tabloids in Swahili, which serialize the works of Shigongo themselves, as well as some collaborating authors. Shigongo's books could be deemed as "popular thrillers", being in fact a mixture of a detective, action, erotic, romance and didactic story, abundantly spiced with exotic landscapes in faraway lands, and, according to Uta Reuster Jahn, "measures up with international thriller writing" (Reuster Jahn 2008:30).

Apparently popular books of the above type cannot be taken for school curriculum – because of abundant erotic and violent scenes, etc. Nevertheless, their reading public is vast and growing; first, because many of these stories, before being published in book form, are serialized in newspapers, and secondly – because of their appeal for the widest reading circles. As put by Shigongo, "I target all the people, but many of my readers are women, and, you know, people of middle and lower classes" (Reuster Jahn 2005:11).

Tanzanian reading public of 'lower classes' has in the previous decades been benefited by the literary program of the Benedictine Publishers in the towns of Ndanda and Peramiho, which published cheap-priced novellas by various authors. After 2000, for reasons mostly financial, Benedictine Publishers have drastically reduced their program, and, as a result, various 'substitutes' started to emerge in the country's urban areas, also owing to the emergence of small-scale local publishers. Recently several such publishing houses in Dar es Salaam started to publish what can be deemed "street horror novels", also many of them previously serialized in newspapers, – cheap and short paperbacks telling stories of witchcraft, cannibalism and related subjects. No matter how dubious literary and other merits of these books can be, they give another example of the endurance of Swahili popular writing in Tanzania.

To round up this brief survey of Tanzanian Swahili literature after 2000, a few words must be said about the country's drama and poetry of the period – and really a few, because, to put it plainly, nothing much can be said about them so far.

Of seven titles published in the period by Tanzanian playwrights, three belong to Said Ahmed Mohamed (all three being published in Kenya) – *Posa za Bikisiwa* presents in an allegorical form the history of Zanzibar island, two other titles – *Amri wa wakati* (2009) and *Janga la werevu* (2011) are educative plays for adolescents. Zanzibari playwright Ali Mwalim Rashid in his play *Mazonge* (2004) gives, also in an allegorical form, his ideas of good governance; Shani Kitogo's play *Kija* (2005) is a parabolic story involving witchcraft, where the author uses the

techniques of epic theatre. One of the reasons for such a decline in the appearance of dramatic texts may be the fact that many of the numerous theatrical troupes in the country, including the school ones, try to come up with their own plays that they perform, thus the need for the 'prefab' drama has gone down considerably.

Tanzanian poetry of the period is in equally ambiguous state. Two works that may be considered as its *nec plus ultra*, two latest collections by two outstanding poets – *Jicho la ndani* (The eye within, 2002) by Said Ahmed Mohamed and *Dhifa* (Feast, 2008) by Euphrase Kezilahabi – were again published in Kenya, with the rights reserved, and I hardly have any information whether they found their way to the poets' native land. Other collections published in this period also belong to established poets – *Wasakatonge* (2003) by well-known Zanzibari poet Mohamed Seif Khatib was almost immediately taken as a school set book; two collections by David Mloka are also used for educational purposes. Arguably the only newcomers in the poetic scene of the period are Sistus Mallya and Gray Mwakalukwa, who both debuted with collections of poems in classical genres of *mashairi* and *tenzi*.

The reasons for such a 'godown' in Tanzanian poetry may only be assumed, and one, probably, again lies in the school orientation; Tanzanian schools largely use already abundant works of classical poetry, e.g. those of Shaaban Robert; new books are accepted rather sporadically, and selling poetry 'outside' the school curriculum is much more problematic than, say, prose works.

Moreover, same as in Kenya, the present state of Tanzanian writing is tightly related to the country's publishing industry. The latter's current state may be illustrated by the fact that presently only two publishers seem to be concerned with producing fictional books in Swahili, namely Mkuki na Nyota, headed by Walter Bgoya, and E&D Publishers, one of the founding figures being a well-known female writer Elieshi Lema. Some titles are with uneven regularity printed by state-backed publishers, such as TPH and TUKI; other, smaller ones, seem to take up the printing of fiction in the absence of other orders – except, definitely, printing of school set-books. Because of that, many writers, as it was mentioned, have to look for publishers abroad – and not even necessarily in neighbouring countries; Eric James Shigongo publishes his Swahili bestsellers as far as India – according to him, because of low cost, high quality and the fact that imported books are not taxed. And yet another major problem lies in book distribution, one striking evidence being the absence of a relatively well-developed network of bookshops.

Preliminary conclusions

The general picture that we saw, against all odds, appears to be more optimistic than otherwise. First of all, it may be observed how tightly the very existence of this literature is interwoven with

various aspects of social life in the two countries. For the start, it seems that present day Swahili writing, at least to a rather high extent, is 'school-oriented'. Even this circumstance, in my view, contains more positive aspects: artistic level of many school set-books is very high; material benefits of school orientation attract aspiring writers; school students acquire well-developed taste to Swahili writing, thus potential reading and writing public is formed. In relation to that, words of praise must definitely be accorded to children's writing, which is now seems to have its heyday. Children's books in Swahili are currently abundant, and, moreover, of very high quality. In fact, there is not a single major author that has not contributed to children's writing, and although commercial factor is again obvious, more important is that the children acquire the background – I would even say, environment – of Swahili creative writing from a very early age, which in the long run evidently helps to form new generations of readers and writers firmly rooted in Swahili culture of letters.

However, it would definitely be a mistake to speak of Swahili writing after the year 2000 as a fully school-oriented literature – because two major strata of this writing are targeting the audiences far beyond the classroom. On the one hand, the 'high-breed' literature, such as 'experimental' and 'neorealist' novel, new forms of drama and poetry serve the needs of those groups who in the later years will form the 'elite' of Swahili-related aspects of social existence, - from educational system to media and beyond. Moreover, these 'high-breed' literary forms have, in fact, put Swahili writing to the frontier of literary development in the region – oddly enough, the much praised East African writing in English is still preferring to cling to 'conventional' forms. On the other hand, people from 'lower classes' get their spiritual needs served by popular writing in Swahili – it especially applies to Tanzania, whereas in Kenya popular literature in Swahili only seems to prepare its first steps (now, for example, Kenyan shops sell Swahili detective novels by Tanzanians Ben Mtobwa and Elvis Musiba).

Finally, the current tangible decrease in Tanzanian writing (and the corresponding rise of Swahili literature in Kenya) again, in my view, show how tightly the development of this literature is bound to social factors – for these changes in the literary development are caused, to a large extent, by the changes of the governmental policies towards the language. Therefore, one may assume that if Tanzanian authorities undertake corresponding measures towards re-strengthening the positions of Swahili writing, primarily, in educational system, and would make necessary steps to support local publishing and book distribution, Tanzanian Swahili writing seems to have all the chances to return to its previous glorious state.

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